

Testimony to the Michigan House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education

January 25, 2012

Good morning. Mr. Chairman and members of the committee - thank you for this opportunity to be here today to provide testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 619.

My name is Jerry Johnson and I am executive director of communications at Genesee Intermediate School District – Michigan's 5th largest regional educational service agency – with nearly 1,200 staff that provide support to our county's 78,000 students in 21 public school districts and 10 public school academies. Joining me today is Genesee Intermediate School District's Business Services Administrator Debra Hartman.

Our interest in providing testimony today is two-fold. First, we are concerned that SB619 lacks any restraint and control measures to ensure accountability pertaining to student performance, instructional integrity, and financial transparency.

Most importantly, however, is our interest in helping you fully realize the extent to which online programming and instruction is already occurring across this state and our role in that process. We're glad that you are excited about online learning – because we are, too.

Some have said that Michigan is behind in the development of online learning options and that this bill is the answer. Our belief is that those saying we're behind in online learning are either misinformed, or refuse to acknowledge what is already going on in the field. Our hope is that you, like us, would conclude that SB619 is unnecessary, risky, laden with pitfalls, and poses costly consequences to taxpayers.

Let's start with a premise that competition creates a better product – we agree. The public school districts in our region are always responding to unique circumstances and working together to find solutions for students and families. Our goal has been to provide options to students; whether in a full online experience, or in one that is blended. This keeps them enrolled in school and engaged with meaningful interaction and relationships.

You may have heard about the Genesee Network for Education Telecommunications (GenNET). This is our collective investment in state of the art technology through a voice, video, and data network. This infrastructure provides administrative and operational platforms that result in efficiency, instructional offerings that give students multiple choices, and professional development resources that stretch our educators and help them integrate technology into the classroom.

GenNET's online instruction component resulted from our collective persistence to get the most from the growing cadre of online content providers. We did not want to be held hostage to a monopoly; nor did we want a one size fits all model. We wanted choices for our students. Over time we established a one stop shop so students and local districts could choose from a menu of online course content and select those that best met their needs. In short, we negotiated the market landscape to serve our needs; NOT the other way around.

We are in the midst of a wave of enthusiasm for online learning – that presents great opportunities. However, this energy must be balanced with this CAUTION: we must ask for whom the opportunity exists. This only benefits students if the framework is in place for reporting pupil contact, retention, course completion, profits, curriculum and testing integrity, and safety from predatorial and cyberbullying behavior.

SB619 presents the potential to Wal-Mart public education. The construct of the cyber school legislation is a dangerous buyer beware proposition. As written, we believe this bill serves the interests of private for-profit entities, not those of students.

The claims of cyber schools being the panacea must be met with these questions:

- As evidenced by what measure? We need data, not promises.
- As required by what standard or reporting mechanism? At present, there is nothing that would compel a cyber school to report much of anything.

Absent these fundamental elements, the elimination of any structured limit on the number of schools or the number of students that can be enrolled simply rolls the red carpet out to vendors. These companies are selling a product that does not necessarily result in an instructional experience that is customized to the individual student.

So - what have we done in Genesee County without incentives, without public subsidy, without reward, and within the system that currently exists, with the resources already available?

We've been able to create another avenue for students to learn - especially for those with all sorts of circumstances that are barriers to their success. We have been able to provide something that otherwise wouldn't exist for them.

It isn't about online or not. It's about options for students. We believe that students now have more options than they've ever had. However, as has been already noted in other testimony, it's not for everyone.

Students are already choosing online options and making decisions today. Students can enroll in one or two courses without a Seat Time Waiver (STW). Above that, the STW comes into play. In our case, the number of students enrolled in 2010-2011 was 3,444 students taking 11,517 courses.

As noted in a recent Mackinac Center article, this was up from about 4,000 courses in 2009-2010. Specifically, there are 1,473 students participating in the STW and they have enrolled in over 8,143 courses.

We are currently working with nine vendors to provide these options. If the seat time waiver would have left it up to open market, there would probably be over 100 vendors wanting to participate. But, students don't have time to wade through the good and bad vendors to get the course they need to complete their education. In most cases, they may already be at risk for educational challenges due to life circumstances.

Therefore we took the initiative to establish a standard for quality assurance that would provide a benchmark of whether or not we were going to offer their product. It's not just about choice, it's about quality choice. To ensure the quality of each vendor, here is what we require evidence of:

1. The course is aligned with Michigan standards; vendors come from other states with other standards and we need to make sure they are aligned with Michigan. Obviously, this means the common core state standards.
2. The course must be a teacher led courses. That means that behind the scenes there is an actual teacher attached to the course. This person is interacting with the student; checking progress, monitoring student performance, redirecting, instructing, and helping the student remain on track. This is not a tutorial, this is direct instruction. There needs to be evidence! We know kids do better in a direct relationship with a highly qualified teacher – whether face to face, or online via video conference, chat, or other forms of connection. (This is a best practice)
3. The courses should be NCAA approved. Many of the students are athletes and in higher levels of competitive activity. This ensures athlete eligibility and the district's ability to compete. It is not a road block – it's a quality assurance. (We take our role seriously in ensuring the courses available will translate into something and not result in lost time)

We believe our framework is value added to the market. It is an open market. Students are choosing and deciding on courses based on those included in our portal. They are comparing "quality" choices not just open range grabbing at straws. In essence, we are providing a good housekeeping seal of approval.

We ensure that there is a mentor required, along with the teacher. This is the individual at the district level that is required to be there for the student. This connection is there to ensure the student has the assistance he or she needs and it prevents the student from just dropping off the face of the earth.

We monitor the data. We look at the trends and patterns of enrollment and adjust accordingly. All of the individual vendor applications are available in one place as a resource for students. If there are issues or complaints, we call the vendor immediately! We are the student's advocate and their relationship to connect with the vendor. There is a process for ensuring the students get what they need and the vendors live up to their covenants that allow them to be on the online portal.

In any case, the teachers can also access the content that is available to teachers across the state via Michigan Learns Online. Our state purchased online content and it is now available for free to teachers to use and develop a blended program. We provide professional development for teachers so they can deliver an online course. This takes the vendors out of the equation and allows local districts and PSA's to develop their own hybrid delivery model with content already approved by MDE.

Recommendation:

A report from The National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado provides these recommendations for creating cyber school options:

Authentication – Measures to confirm identity of the student to ensure the student enrolled is doing the work.

Accreditation – Firms should have some form of endorsement from within the field.

Audits – Financial audits of the firms should be conducted to determine actual costs and whether the per-pupil payment is reasonable.

We suggest that there should be:

1. Pre-screening prior to placement or enrollment to ensure student readiness
2. Quality of content must be reviewed to ensure it meets the common core state standards and is aligned with Michigan and national tests
3. Highly qualified teachers should be involved
4. Clearly delineated protocols for how credit will be accumulated and how transcripts will be provided.
5. Clearly stated expectations and processes for data collection that are transparent to the public and on the vendor's website.

We, like you, want good things for the students of Michigan. We want options and choices that will lead to a coherent and effective academic achievement. We also want efficiency and accountability to ensure we're getting the most results for the taxpayer dollar. We don't believe SB619 delivers either of those.

SB619 is bad public policy, bad fiscal policy, and we strongly encourage you to vote no on the bill. Thank you, and we'll take any questions you may have.

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